

FOREWORD BY CRAIG S. KEENER

THE UNTOLD STORY

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New Testament Church

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FRANK VIOLA

FOREWORD BY CRAIG S. KEENER

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OF THE
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“This unique volume is full of documentation as well, showing the care that went into it. For pastors and all others interested in the unfolding of the New Testament, this book is a treasure to mine.”

—**Darrell Bock, Executive Director for Cultural Engagement Hendricks Center Senior Research Professor of New Testament Studies**

“With great erudition, Frank Viola has provided readers with a wonderful resource. It would be an understatement to say the breadth of research involved in this project is ‘impressive.’ Highly recommended.”

—**Michael Licona, Ph.D., Professor of New Testament Studies, Houston Christian University**

“Frank Viola performs an invaluable service for Christians today by centering this book on the story of the early church, what he calls “the community of the King.” The result is a highly readable (and well-researched) story of the New Testament church, a genuinely accessible biography of the church, that congregations and classrooms will find indispensable.”

—**Joel B. Green, Senior Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Fuller Theological Seminary**

“In this fascinating volume Frank Viola seeks to write a narrative history of the early church by examining the New Testament documents within their respective historical and chronological contexts. His conclusions are plausible and consistently interesting and insightful. This is an excellent resource for those seeking to understand authentic Christianity by listening to its earliest voices.”

—**Mark L. Strauss, Ph.D., University Professor of New Testament, Bethel Seminary**

“In one volume Frank Viola has recast the entire New Testament as a single readable narrative, but as supported by scholarly notation of the highest order. This single book is for the general reader, the pastor, and the academic. *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church* is an amazing accomplishment. I know of no book like it. Highly recommended.”

—**Paul Barnett, Ph.D., New Testament Scholar and Lecturer Emeritus, Moore College, Sydney; teaching fellow at Regent College, Vancouver**

“This is an enormously helpful survey of the history of the roughly thirty years from the ministry of Jesus to the end of the apostolic period, replete with comments on the significance of historical events for the faith of Jesus followers and with comments on secondary literature.”

—**Eckhard Schnabel, Mary F. Rockefeller Emeritus Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary**

“In *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church*, bestselling author Frank Viola offers a lengthy innovative reconstruction correlating the chronological sequence in the narrative of Acts with the apostolic journeys and letters of Paul and the other apostles. A treasure trove of detail for Christian pastors and leaders of Bible study, with magisterial references to books and articles by Christian New Testament scholars.”

—**Richard Horsley, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Liberal Arts and the Study of Religion at the University of Massachusetts, Boston**

“Viola weaves the evidence of the New Testament into a single unfolding and compelling story. Yet he does so not with unbridled imagination, but with a profound reliance on the best scholarship available. The end result is an accurate, engaging and compelling account of this movement that has had a monumental impact on history and continues to do so today.”

—**Clinton E. Arnold, Research Professor of New Testament, Talbot School of Theology (Biola)**

“I know no other book like this. Written for everyday readers, it is accessible, engaging, and compelling—and yet it is meticulously researched with depth and breadth of learning, in conversation with leading scholars in the field. I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to understand how the whole New Testament fits together—as history, theology, and mission.”

—**Constantine R. Campbell, Professor and Research Director, Sydney College of Divinity**

“Viola has produced a truly remarkable book—a reconstruction of the gospel story of the New Testament church that skillfully and helpfully presents the events recorded in Matthew through Revelation in a chronological rather than canonical order.”

—**Jeffrey A. D. Weima, Professor of New Testament Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan**

“Frank Viola has bravely and diligently undertaken the task of collecting the many bits and pieces of this story that can be known from the letters alongside Acts and of presenting one plausible vision of how all these pieces can be synthesized into a coherent, unfolding story.”

—**David A. deSilva, Trustees’ Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Greek, Ashland Theological Seminary**

“A masterpiece! *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church: Revised and Expanded* is stunning in its sweep – compelling and readable. It’s an enthralling journey into the New Testament story – a work full of depth and insight.”

—**Jon Zens, D.Min., theologian, author, editor of *Searching Together***

“Frank Viola uses the evidence from your Bible to tell the story of Jesus and the New Testament church as a single drama from beginning to end. Using the biblical accounts, he weaves a careful, readable chronology that (as the title asserts) has never been done before!”

—**Reta Halteman Finger, professor emerita of New Testament at Eastern Mennonite University**

“Often, we take the letters of Paul in isolation from the letters of John or the Acts of the Apostles or the book of Revelation. Instead, Viola knits these together into a satisfying account of what happened in the first century of the Jesus movement. This is no solo project; he analyzes loads of data with the help of top scholars from around the world to guide him, *and us*. What emerges is an engaging, intricately told, plausible account of the origins of our Christian faith that sheds fresh light on all the New Testament letters. The story continues...”

—**David B. Capes, Ph.D., New Testament Scholar and Director of Academic Programming,
The Lanier Theological Library and Learning Center, Houston**

“Frank Viola’s *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church* offers a compelling narrative of the entire New Testament and early Christianity from the Gospels to Revelation. It’s truly a monumental accomplishment that connects history and Scripture with attention to detail as a cohesive whole.”

—**Alan Bandy, Robert Hamblin Chair of Biblical Exposition Professor of New Testament and
Greek at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary**

“This vivid retelling brings to life Paul and his companions—alongside Peter, James, and John—chronicling the conflicts and hardships they endured and their unwavering courage to proclaim Jesus as promised Messiah and Savior. Viola’s ‘plausible reconstruction’ not only fills in the New Testament’s historical narrative but also invites readers to see themselves as part of an ongoing story. (Lovers of footnotes will find themselves in paradise!)”

—**Amy J. Chase, Ph.D., Drew University, Madison, New Jersey**

“Understanding the early church requires more than just dry facts. Frank Viola’s *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church* takes on the monumental task of retelling this history in a captivating narrative, offering a fresh perspective on the people, places, and events that shaped Christianity.”

—**Christoph Heilig, Ph.D., New Testament Scholar and Research Group Leader
at the University of Munich**

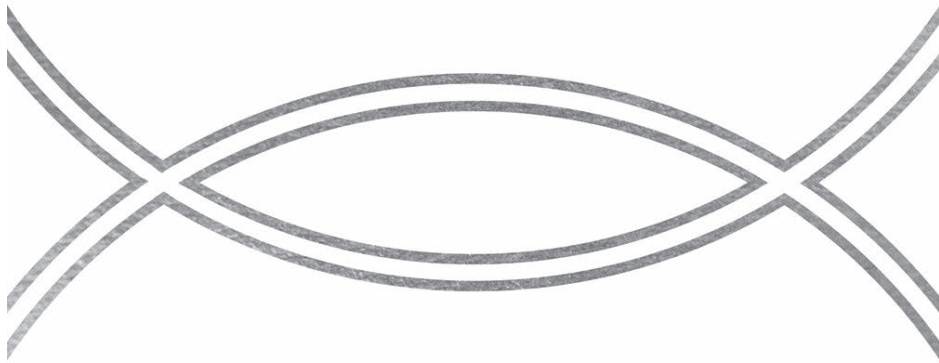
“In *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church: Revised and Expanded*, Frank Viola has engaged the wider world of biblical scholarship and produced a work that flows like a novel but is in fact part New Testament Introduction, part New Testament history, and part Christian inspiration. Viola is a gifted writer and this book will help persons hungry to know more about Scripture and the Jesus to whom it testifies.”

—**Brian D. Russell, Ph.D, Professor of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary**

“Frank Viola has produced a unique book that will not only enable readers to understand the message of the New Testament on a much deeper level but will also draw people closer to Jesus Christ. *The Untold Story of the New Testament* will captivate ordinary readers and engage scholars without losing the average high school or college student. It is a gift.”

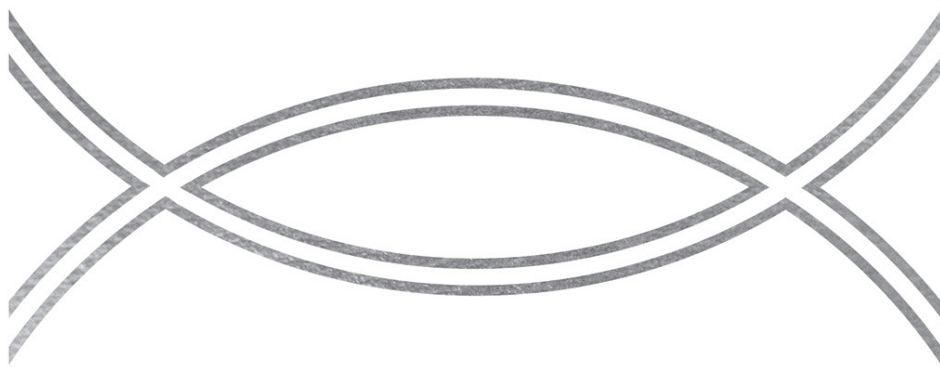
—**Tim Oslovich, Master of Theological Studies, Harvard Divinity School,
Bishop of the Alaska Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

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New Testament Church

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FRANK VIOLA



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*With deepest love and appreciation,
to the kindest woman I've ever known,
my mother—Jeanette.*

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FOREWORD

CONTEXT IS ONE of the most crucial resources for properly understanding the New Testament. The God of the Bible is not a God of isolated verses without their context. History testifies that taking verses out of context has led to all kinds of beliefs and practices that are unbiblical. Too often we take short-cuts to understanding the Bible by quoting random verses or assuming that others who taught us have understood them correctly.

After one begins reading the New Testament a book at a time, one quickly recognizes that verses isolated from their context nearly always mean something different when read in context. But we cannot, in fact, pretend to make sense of most verses without reading their context. In fact, the method of isolating verses from their context disrespects the authority of Scripture.

That people so often read the Bible out of context is not because it comes naturally to us, but because we have been taught the wrong way by others' examples. It is important that we not get so wrapped up in the details of the text (or worse yet, the point for which we wish to use it) that we miss the larger picture of the context. If we ignore context, we will almost always misunderstand what we read in the Bible. Context, coupled with background information, is the most critical key to biblical interpretation. In my academic work and commentaries, I've consistently emphasized this principle as foundational for sound biblical exegesis.

In *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church: Revised and Expanded*, Frank Viola brings context and background together, inviting us on a captivating journey through the birth and growth of the first-century church. With a reputation for captivating prose and heartfelt storytelling, Viola brings his unique perspective to reconstruct the events from Matthew to Revelation. *The Untold Story* offers a plausible chronological narrative that reveals the grand tapestry of God's kingdom plan and brings the characters of the story to life.

The book expertly weaves the framework of Acts with the epistles, tracing the early church's evolution from Pentecost to Patmos. The narrative takes you through pivotal locations such as Jerusalem, Antioch, Greece, Ephesus, and Rome, allowing you to experience Paul's letters—as well as the other epistles—within the context of the early church's history.

THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

While the heart of the story begins at Pentecost, *The Untold Story* ensures that Jesus remains the central figure, illustrating how the church grows from and around Him.

The book is designed for accessibility. Readers can easily navigate through the main text and delve into the footnotes for deeper insights. Viola draws on a wealth of evangelical scholarship, consulting the best resources from the past and present, making this work both informative and engaging.

Whether you're a seasoned Christian or a curious newcomer, this book will transform your understanding of the New Testament. It's not just a history lesson; it's an invitation to see yourself as part of this ongoing story—a story that began two thousand years ago and continues to shape our world today. Prepare to be enlightened, inspired, and challenged as you embark on this extraordinary journey through the cradle of Christianity and the profound impact of Jesus in this unique book.

Craig S. Keener
F. M. and Ada Thompson Professor of Biblical Studies
Asbury Theological Seminary

READ THIS FIRST

Of course, one can always read some kind of meaning into a verse of Scripture. But those who understand that the books of the New Testament were written to specific people, in specific places, nearly two thousand years ago, know that this is not a good idea. If the New Testament texts were written to make sense to people in the first century, then we must try to put ourselves into their places to determine what the writers of the New Testament intended their readers to understand by what they wrote. If we try to make sense of the Bible with no knowledge of the people who wrote it, those who read it, and the society in which they lived, we will be inclined to read into the Scriptures our own society's values and ideas. This would be a major mistake since our culture is very different from that of the ancient Romans.¹

IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES, I have set out to present the unfolding drama of the New Testament church in chronological order. Reconstructing the first-century story chronologically is not only a herculean effort; it's an impossible one. This is true not just for me but for every person who attempts such a task, including the best scholars and historians. The reason is simple. *None of us were there.*

The information we have about the first-century church is limited. But we have enough solid data about the ancient world that a plausible reconstruction can be created.² By "New Testament church," I'm referring collectively to the Christian communities we find in the twenty-seven books that comprise our New Testament.³ A large portion of the

1. James Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 11.

2. I write the book I wish existed but cannot find because it doesn't exist. I'm unaware of a book that (1) tells the entire story of the primitive church from Pentecost to Patmos in an easy-to-read format, (2) that's nonfiction, and (3) that's historically plausible and heavily documented using the best scholarship available.

3. The term "New Testament" was created in the second century. The phrase is a translation from the Latin *Novum Testamentum*, and according to many sources, it was first coined by Tertullian (*An Answer to the Jews*). Melito of Sardis is credited with coining the term "Old Testament" (*From the Book of Extracts*). Note that I'm referring specifically to the phrase "New Testament," not "New Covenant." New Covenant (*kaine diatheke*) occurs in the Greek New Testament in the narratives of the Last Supper and in Hebrews 8.

New Testament drama is based on the narrative of Luke’s two-volume work known as Luke-Acts.⁴

Luke’s first volume, the Gospel of Luke, narrates the story of Jesus during “the days of His flesh”⁵—while He was incarnated in human form—from Galilee to Jerusalem.⁶ Luke’s second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, narrates the continuing story of Jesus—now in the Spirit working through His body (the church)⁷—from Jerusalem to Rome.⁸ To put it in

4. Witherington argues that Luke and Acts are “a two-volume historiographical work.” Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 15-39. See also Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), chaps. 1-3. Keener agrees adding that Acts is an authentic historical monograph. It’s both accurate and detailed in its travel journal aspects, and the “we” portions attest to its legitimacy. Craig Keener, “Lessons on Acts,” Sessions 1 and 2 (Seedbed, unpublished video series, undated). Luke-Acts makes up almost one-third of the New Testament. Ben Witherington III, *Invitation to the New Testament: First Things*, second edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 105. For a discussion on Luke-Acts in the context of Jewish and Greek historiography, see Gregory Sterling, *Shaping the Past to Define the Present: Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023); Ben Witherington III, ed., *History, Literature and Society in the Book of Acts* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chap. 3. A good overview of Luke-Acts, including purpose, historicity, and themes, can be found in Michael Bird, *A Bird’s-Eye View of Luke and Acts: Context, Story, and Themes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023).

5. This phrase comes from Hebrews 5:7, NKJV.

6. The Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts each cover a period of a little over thirty years. (The book of Luke likely covers 4 B.C. to A.D. 30, while Acts covers A.D. 30 to A.D. 62.) Both volumes are about the same length. Ancient historiographers in the Greek tradition tried to keep the volumes of a historical series the same size and proportion. Interestingly, the last 23 percent of Luke’s Gospel chronicles the events leading to Jesus’ trials and death, while the last 24 percent of Acts chronicles the events leading to Paul’s trials and imprisonment. For details, see Wayne Meeks, ed., *Library of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 8:77-115. The prologues in both volumes indicate that the documents were intended to be first-century histories. Bruce Malina and John Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 6. For a careful examination of the structure of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, see Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 1:550-581.

7. Even though “church” is a poor translation of *ekklesia*, I’m intentionally using it in this book at times since it’s universally known. I hope my use of the term throughout the story will recapture its original meaning.

8. In the Gospel of Luke, the story moves *toward* Jerusalem. In Acts, the story moves *away* from Jerusalem. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke: Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 14-15. I agree with those scholars who make the case that Acts (as well as the Gospel of Luke) is historically accurate. Ancient historiographies were not only meant to document historical events; they were also designed to teach

Luke's words, the Gospel of Luke presents what Jesus *began* to do and teach in His mortal body, while Acts presents what Jesus *continued* to do and teach through His spiritual body, the ekklesia.⁹

*The first book I wrote, Theophilus, concerned all that Jesus began both to do and to teach....
(Acts 1:1)*¹⁰

Luke's second volume (Acts) satisfies the promise of the first volume (Luke). The "light for revelation to the nations" is fulfilled,¹¹ and the gospel of Jesus Christ spreads from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.¹² *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church* is unique

moral, theological, or political lessons. In Acts, Luke teaches about how God empowered His apostles and His ekklesia to penetrate all cultural and social barriers to bring the gospel of the kingdom to the nations and establish kingdom communities. Ancient historical works like Acts were written differently from how history is written today. "Dr. Craig Keener on the Historicity of the Book of Acts," video interview, Seedbed, January 23, 2013; "Lessons on Acts," Session 3. For details on the historical reliability of Acts, see Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*; Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1980); John Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 21-37; Craig Keener, *Acts*, 1:3-220; *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), chaps. 6-8. For a detailed exploration of the apologetics and purpose of Acts, see Craig Keener, *Acts*, 1:435-458; F.F. Bruce, *A Mind for What Matters: Collected Essays* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), chap. 11.

9. The ekklesia (church) is the body of Christ. Ephesians 1:22-23. Luke and Acts are known as "parallel" works. This means the wording and events in Acts parallel the wording and events in Luke. Some examples: Jesus was anointed with the Spirit in Luke; the ekklesia was anointed with the Spirit in Acts. Jesus had three trials in Luke; Paul had three trials in Acts, etc. See Craig Keener, "Lessons on Acts," Session 3.

10. Scripture quotes are from the World English Bible (WEB). There are different versions of this edition. Quotes in this book have been taken from the version that appeared on biblegateway.com, accessed July 2023. The WEB version was selected because it's an excellent translation. It also contains textual notes that shed light on the Greek text. For instance, "brothers" can often be translated "brothers and sisters." While a perfect translation of the New Testament doesn't exist, the WEB is among the best.

11. Luke 2:32.

12. Acts 1:8; 13:46-47; 26:16-18. Paul Barnett, *Paul: Missionary of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 203, 209. For a detailed analysis of the Jewish-Christian mission from Jerusalem to Rome, see Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1:730-910. As we shall later see, the phrase "the end of the earth" in Greek and Roman literature referred to Spain (meaning, the

in that it uses the rest of the New Testament to inform the drama in Acts, a drama Luke deliberately abridged. It also weaves into the story the best scholarship to date on day-to-day life for the common person living in the first century. The result is a free-flowing narrative that puts you in the center of the story—a story that has at its core the kingdom of God breaking into the earth. The words of one scholar capture the essence of this work:

*As we read on, we find that the story of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles is also incomplete and needs to be complemented by information from Paul's letters.... I believe many readers will be surprised at the wealth of solid historical information to be found within the New Testament and the degree to which the New Testament story can be reconstructed.*¹³

This book guides the reader through the New Testament letters in sequential order, providing the historical background for each. As such, it is a cross between a narrative commentary and a Bible handbook. One would think the story of the first-century Christians would be common knowledge among those who read and study the Bible. But that's not the case. In my experience and observation, the majority of pastors, Bible teachers, and seminary students are unaware of many important details in this wonderful saga.

The reason has to do with how ministers are trained today. In many seminaries, there's a fundamental disconnect between church history and the New Testament epistles. The seminary student typically studies the events mentioned in the book of Acts in a “church history” course, and the same student learns to exegete (interpret and expound) the letters of the New Testament in a “New Testament studies” class.¹⁴ The result: What God has

end of the world in the west). Eckhard Schnabel, *Jesus in Jerusalem: The Last Days* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 394-395.

13. Paul Barnett, *Bethlehem to Patmos: The New Testament Story* (Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton Australia, 1989), 10-11.

14. An example of New Testament exegesis can be found in N. Clayton Croy's excellent book, *Prima Scriptura: An Introduction to New Testament Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011) and N.T. Wright's, *Interpreting Scripture: Essays on the Bible and Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020). A related matter is how “biblical studies” and “systematic theology” have been separated. For the discussion, see C. Kavin Rowe, *Method, Context, and Meaning in New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 36-58.

joined together, man has put asunder.¹⁵ The free-flowing story that harmonizes the narrative in Acts with the New Testament letters is rarely connected.¹⁶

A valuable skill that seminary provides is the ability to exegete Scripture. In this regard, seminary students who major in New Testament studies become masters at analyzing the individual books of Matthew through Revelation. They are like ecologists who study the composition of a tree. They're trained to uncover the bark, examine the sap, inspect the roots, and dissect the leaves. But by and large, they miss the drama for the details and are blinded from seeing the larger shape of the forest.¹⁷

Once we step back and survey the entire forest, however, we can see how each tree came into being and its relationship to the other trees. Learning the heart-pounding saga of the New Testament church provides this broader perspective—a perspective that provides insight into the meaning of the New Testament writings. My intention in this book is to expand our horizons so we can see the story differently—to view it from new perspectives and fresh angles, putting the pieces together in illuminating ways. Grasping what the New Testament is trying to communicate will never happen by applying a fresh coat of paint or adding new furniture to old rooms. What's required is building new foundations that challenge the old and escort us into new vistas. This is what I have attempted to do in these pages.

The book is divided into five sections, each representing a specific “motion” God has taken to fulfill His magnificent obsession, which the New Testament calls “the eternal

15. In the words of Jeffrey Weima, “the human authors are ultimately only the secondary authors of Scripture; they are inspired by the primary author, the Holy Spirit, and because there is only the one and same Holy Spirit speaking through various secondary human authors, He (the Holy Spirit) gives a fundamental unity to the whole of the Bible; thus, we can and ought to ‘compare Scripture with Scripture,’ that is, use one portion of God’s word (such as the New Testament letters) to shed light on another portion of God’s word (such as the book of Acts).” Personal correspondence with Jeffrey Weima, 12/28/23.

16. Throughout the book of Acts, Luke clearly has gaps in his narrative. Like other historiographies, he compresses and abridges many of the stories he rehearses. But often, the gaps can be filled in from the epistles. Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 3:2295; David Bauer, *The Book of Acts as Story: A Narrative-Critical Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 7-10.

17. For a fuller explanation of this problem, see Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry and Tragedy of Triumph* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 1-5.

purpose.”¹⁸ I build the story around the theme of the explosive gospel of the kingdom of God,¹⁹ the subject of my landmark work *Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom*.²⁰

A Word About the Sources

Whenever I give talks in conferences and churches on the explosive story of the New Testament church, at least one person throws up their hand and asks, “Where are you getting all this information from?” For this reason, I’ve been extremely careful to document all the sources I’ve used in compiling the story. This includes biblical references. It should be noted that in the world of New Testament scholarship, everything is disputable. There is no such thing as 100 percent “scholarly consensus.” All of it is up for debate.²¹ In fact, scholars dispute the date and origin of every New Testament book. Therefore, when Bible commentators attempt to reconstruct the historical background of a New Testament book, they make countless hypothetical reconstructions and educated conjectures based on the available evidence.

Their views are derived from what they consider to be solid evidence, but how they interpret it often results from their own presuppositions and theological leanings. As a result, they often disagree with the details of other scholars’ conclusions. For this reason, I’ve cited numerous scholarly and historical sources that either *inform* or *confirm* what makes the most sense to me when I read the New Testament in light of the available historical

18. Ephesians 3:11, ESV. For a detailed discussion of the eternal purpose of God, see my book *From Eternity to Here: Rediscovering the Ageless Purpose of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009). I give further details in the premium master class *Exquisite Passion: A Deeper Journey into God’s Eternal Purpose* at thedeepchristianlife.com/classes. See also frankviola.org/eternalpurpose for all my work on God’s timeless purpose.

19. The kingdom of God is at the heart of God’s eternal purpose and thus cannot be separated from it.

20. Frank Viola, *Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018). If you haven’t read that book yet, I encourage you to do so after you read *The Untold Story*. It explains the high-voltage gospel that Jesus, Paul, and the other apostolic workers preached and how it differs from what’s often proclaimed today. I also give further details on the gospel of the kingdom in the master class *Everlasting Domain: Restoring the Kingdom Message* at thedeepchristianlife.com/classes. The eternal purpose and the kingdom of God cannot be separated.

21. Just because I cite a book by a scholar to support a certain point does not mean I agree with everything contained in that particular book or what the scholar has said elsewhere.

data. In the words of one of my historical advisors, the book you hold in your hands is a “plausible reconstruction” of the first-century church since a reconstruction that’s certain at every point is impossible.²²

What is more, I’ve sought to write a plausible narrative that’s also *readable*—almost like a novel. Every part of the book is either certain, likely, plausible, or at least possible. The footnotes provide biblical support, historical sources, reasoning for my conclusions, and debated points among scholars.

I was happy to test my theories against numerous scholars, being corrected by some while challenging others. Often, my instincts on how I connected the dots were confirmed. To my initial surprise, virtually every scholar I read or with whom I dialogued speculates generously about the details of what took place in the first century. Consequently, the person who demands “proof” to buttress every detail in the story will be sadly disappointed. The best we can do is piece together the available evidence and create plausible scenarios to make sense of the narrative.²³

In that regard, when one sets out to reconstruct the New Testament drama, the question is never, “Can you prove your scenario?” Instead, the question is always, “Is this scenario historically plausible or at least possible?”²⁴ To the objection that I am “jumping to

22. New Testament scholar Craig Keener gave me this terminology, calling the book a “plausible reconstruction” of the primitive church after reviewing the first draft. Personal correspondence with Craig Keener, 12/4/23.

23. This is why there is tremendous debate among scholars over the details of every book in the New Testament. For example, all of Paul’s letters are in dispute except Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Bruce Longenecker, *In Stone and Story: Early Christianity in the Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 33; Lars Kierspel, *Charts on the Life, Letters, and Theology of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2012), 79. Throughout this book, I side with those scholars who believe the entire “Pauline canon” (Romans to Philemon) was authored by Paul of Tarsus. See David Capes, Rodney Reeves, and E. Randolph Richards, *Rediscovering Paul: An Introduction to His World, Letters and Theology*, second edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 7-10.

24. Incidentally, I agree with those scholars who believe the Gospels and the book of Acts are authentic and historically reliable. For details, see F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1943); Michael Licona, *Jesus, Contradicted: Why the Gospels Tell the Same Story Differently* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024); Craig Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, second edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007); N.T. Wright and Michael Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), chaps. 1-4, 35-36; J.B. Lightfoot, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 53ff.; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, second

conclusions” in the book, it would be more accurate to say that I’m carefully walking to my conclusions with at least one respected scholar leading or confirming every step.

A Word About the Footnotes and Boxes

Since this work is written for a popular audience rather than an academic one, I’ve presented the story as simply as I could without bogging down the narrative with academic minutia. At the same time, scholars and those academically inclined will find my perspectives supported in the footnotes. Sometimes I’ve used footnotes to add further details that help illuminate the main narrative. At other times, I reference a book, podcast episode, or article where I’ve expanded a particular subject in more detail. I also liberally reference the works of others who expand on topics I only briefly discuss. (If I didn’t take this approach, this book would be at least 5,000 pages long, which means no human would read it.²⁵)

There’s no reason to be overwhelmed by the footnotes. I chose to use them instead of endnotes because I want readers to understand how I’m connecting the dots. I also wanted to add further details to parts of the story, some of which are fascinating but too granular

edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017); Darrell Bock, *Acts: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 6-20; James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), chap. 1; Darrell Bock and Robert Webb, *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002); Craig Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019). According to Luke 24, women were witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. This attests to the credibility of the author and the story. No ancient author would have fabricated such an account. Under Roman and Jewish law, the testimony of women was essentially discounted. Craig Keener, “Lessons on Acts,” Session 3; Holly Carey, *Women Who Do: Female Disciples in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023), 40. For a discussion on how the New Testament came to be written and recognized, see Ben Witherington III, *The New Testament Story*, 3-105; *Invitation to the New Testament*, 433-451; *Sola Scriptura: Scripture’s Final Authority in the Modern World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2023); F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 117-334; Benjamin Laird, *Creating the Canon: Composition, Controversy, and the Authority of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023), chaps. 4-8; Susan Lim, *Light of the Word: How Knowing the History of the Bible Illuminates Our Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023); Michael Shepherd, *An Introduction to the Making and Meaning of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024).

25. Many scholars get into the weeds on the subjects they treat. Others not only examine every weed; they investigate the microorganisms in the soil! Craig Keener’s magisterial four-volume commentary on Acts is an example, standing at over 4,400 pages.

to insert into the main text.²⁶ *Therefore, if you aren't used to reading heavily documented books, ignore the footnotes.* You can always go back for a second read and peruse them. Additionally, you can consult the notes whenever you encounter a question or need clarification while reading the primary text. (The notes also help prevent misunderstandings and incorrect assumptions.)

To further aid the readability of the main narrative, I've placed more comprehensive information about each New Testament book, Paul's apostolic journeys, and the sociological conditions of the first century in gray boxes throughout the chapters. The boxes shed further light on the narrative. I've also added all the New Testament epistles in what many scholars regard as their proper chronological sequence within the story.²⁷ Chapter and verse notations have been removed to best reflect how the letters sounded to their original audiences. As one scholar put it,

*It is high time, in any editions that wish to facilitate rather than impede readers' understanding of the New Testament writings, for not only verse divisions...but also the conventional chapter divisions to disappear completely from the text and to be placed as inconspicuously as possible in the margins.*²⁸

As you can see in the bibliography, my research is both varied and far-reaching. However, I've relied most heavily on several highly respected scholars. For the chronological sequence and dating of each New Testament event, I've largely followed the chronologies in the works of F.F. Bruce and Ben Witherington III.²⁹ Regarding the dating of each

26. You can think of the book you hold in your hands as an entire seminary library on New Testament studies and early church history condensed into a readable narrative and put under one cover.

27. The Gospels, Acts, and Revelation do not appear in this book. Adding the text of these volumes would take up far too much space. But their content is summarized later in the story. Since this book is designed to unlock the epistles, it's necessary that they appear in their entirety in the appropriate locations.

28. Hermann von Soden, quoted in Christopher Smith, *The Beauty Behind the Mask: Rediscovering the Books of the Bible* (Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2007), 75.

29. Bruce's chronology can be found in his two books: F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977) and *The Book of the Acts*, revised edition, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988). For Witherington's chronology, see his *Invitation to the New Testament*, 161-172; *The New Testament Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 273-274; *The Acts of the Apostles*, 81-86. I've also consulted Alan Bandy's chronology in *An Illustrated Guide to the Apostle Paul: His Life, Ministry, and Missionary Journeys*

New Testament epistle, I've sometimes followed the research in Jonathan Bernier's *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament*, adding additional conclusions by other scholars.³⁰ Distances between cities are mostly based on the *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts through Revelation*.³¹

Beyond the names that appear in the Acknowledgments at the end of the book, I am indebted to Craig Keener,³² David deSilva,³³ Jeffrey Weima,³⁴ Alan Bandy,³⁵ and Paul Barnett.³⁶ All of them served as my historical advisors for this project.³⁷ Each one kindly offered suggestions, corrections, improvements, clarifications, and additions. My

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021), 18-19. For Witherington's fuller discussion on chronology, see *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 304-331. For a detailed conversation on dating and the disputes over New Testament chronology, see James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 497-512; Robert Jewett, *A Chronology of Paul's Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1979), chap. 1; Craig Blomberg and Darlene Seal, *From Pentecost to Patmos* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2021), 24-28; David Capes, et al., *Rediscovering Paul*, 78-81. N.T. Wright's chronological table differs slightly from the above works. N.T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018), 433-434. See also F.F. Bruce, *A Mind for What Matters*, chap. 9.

30. Jonathan Bernier, *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament: The Evidence for Early Composition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022). Bernier's book is an upgrade of John A.T. Robinson's *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976). Keep in mind that dating the New Testament documents, "especially of the Gospels is to some degree a matter of conjecture." Personal correspondence with Craig Keener, 12/4/23.

31. Barry Beitzel, ed., *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts through Revelation* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019). Distances between cities is another area where scholars and historians diverge.

32. Craig S. Keener is F. M. and Ada Thompson Professor of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary. He's widely regarded to be one of the world's foremost experts on New Testament background.

33. David A. deSilva is the Trustees' Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Greek at Ashland Theological Seminary.

34. Jeffrey A. D. Weima is professor of New Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

35. Alan S. Bandy, PhD, is the Robert Hamblin Chair of Biblical Exposition Professor of New Testament and Greek at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

36. Paul Barnett, AM, is a world-renowned ancient historian and New Testament scholar. He is currently a lecturer emeritus at Moore College in Sydney, Australia, and a teaching fellow at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada.

37. Ben Witherington was also helpful through lengthy email correspondences that spanned many years. While I have significant disagreements with Witherington on certain aspects of ecclesiology, his understanding of New Testament chronology and various aspects of first-century history is exceptional.

sentiments regarding the book’s balance of academically rigorous research with popularly accessible prose are expressed perfectly by one well-respected scholar’s description of one of his own works:

*This is not a technical book, nor a popular one either...the former are too linguistically daunting for most readers, while the latter are too particular in their emphasis...I have written this for those who find themselves caught in the middle.*³⁸

A Word About How the Book Is Organized

Following “Decoding the New Testament” and “A Note about Words and Definitions”—which are critical to understanding this book—I begin the story with a Prologue and the first motion (or divine movement) that began before time, when God conceived His eternal purpose. That brief chapter is followed by several short chapters on the life and ministry of Jesus. Since *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church* focuses on the story from Pentecost to Patmos,³⁹ the chapters on Jesus in Nazareth and Galilee are intentionally brief. They are designed to lay specific groundwork that will reappear later in the story.

The meat of the book begins at Pentecost in A.D. 30. Following that, we go to Antioch of Syria where Paul (also called “Saul” by Luke) is sent out to begin his apostolic ministry. That’s when the book hits its stride and we watch the incredible drama of the New Testament epistles unfold. The book ends with Patmos and how the first apostles of Jesus served and died for their Lord. That section is followed by the coming of the King to earth and the eternal future that God has prepared for all who love Him.

Finally, after the Epilogue, more chapters follow that expand some of the key themes in the book. While these chapters do not continue the narrative, they are vital for reflections, insights, and takeaways.

38. Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community: Spirit and Culture in the Early House Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), xi.

39. While the main focus of this narrative begins at Pentecost and ends at Patmos, I begin the story before time, through Israel’s history, and then through Bethlehem and Nazareth. I then extend the story after the death of the apostles, into the present time and eternity future.

Mirror-Reading Biblical Texts

Many of the conclusions I draw in this narrative are derived from a method commonly referred to as “mirror-reading.” Mirror-reading is the process of reconstructing the historical situation of a New Testament letter by reading the author’s response within the letter and then inferring the situation to which he was responding. In the words of F.F. Bruce, when reading the New Testament letters, “We are in a position of people listening to one end of a telephone conversation; we have to infer what is being said at the other end in order to reconstruct the situation for ourselves.”⁴⁰ The idea is that the author’s response reveals or “mirrors” the specific situation he addresses.⁴¹ Emphasizing the importance of this approach, other scholars have put it this way:

*The first thing one must try to do with any of the Epistles is to form a tentative but informed reconstruction of the situation to which the author is speaking. What was going on in Corinth that caused Paul to write 1 Corinthians? How does he come to learn of their situation? What kind of relationship and former contacts has he had with them? What attitudes do they and he reflect in this letter? These are the kinds of questions to which you want answers.*⁴²

One writer aptly states, “In order to begin interpreting the biblical text, we must understand its context in the world from which it came.”⁴³ I firmly agree. Without a thorough and accurate understanding of the context of a biblical text, we risk misinterpreting it:

40. F.F. Bruce, *Answers to Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 93.

41. For a discussion on mirror-reading, see E.P. Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle’s Life, Letters, and Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 165; Moisés Silva, *Explorations in Exegetical Method: Galatians As a Test Case* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996). When speaking about Paul’s letters, Sanders rightly argues that they were “real letters” rather than “academic essays” (169). Depending on how one uses it, “mirror-reading can become very speculative [so] scholars today warn that this should be used with caution.” Personal correspondence with Craig Keener, 12/4/23. Knowing this to be the case, I’ve used mirror-reading throughout this book with extreme care. I agree with Weima who says, “While scholars today are often critical about it [mirror-reading], it nevertheless is an approach that, when used properly, can be used to reconstruct historical contexts confidently.” Personal correspondence with Jeffrey Weima, 12/28/23.

42. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: fourth edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 61.

43. Sherri Brown and Francis Moloney, *Interpreting the Gospel and Letters of John: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 33.

*When we read the New Testament through our modern cultural and theological lenses, we bring all kinds of convictions, constraints, and contexts to the text that were not there for the authors and first audiences.*⁴⁴

Let me illustrate how mirror-reading works.⁴⁵ Consider this text in Philippians 4:2:

I exhort Euodia, and I exhort Syntyche, to think the same way in the Lord.

Mirror-reading enables us to conclude that two women in the church were in conflict with one another. Paul's appeal that they "think the same way" informs this interpretation.⁴⁶ Richard Horsley and Neil Asher Silberman sum up the argument this way:

*Although the Pauline letters have been adopted as separate "books" of the New Testament and have been interpreted for centuries as timeless theological essays, we must remember that each letter (and, in some cases, specific passages within the individual letters) was composed in a particular historical context.*⁴⁷

44. Personal correspondence with David deSilva, 3/23/22.

45. James D.G. Dunn describes the importance of mirror-reading when he notes, "We will not really be able to understand the 'why' of a line of argument or of a particular emphasis without having some awareness of the arguments being thus countered." James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 17. John Barclay sketches out the benefits and pitfalls of mirror-reading in "Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case," *JSNT* 31 (1987): 73-93. While I agree with Barclay's points overall, I think he overstates some of the pitfalls. For example, I don't question Paul's motivations nor the reliability of his sources when he describes his opponents. Neither do I believe Paul was creating a straw man fallacy (which is what his detractors did). To my mind, one of the benefits of understanding "the story" and grasping the whole sweep of the New Testament narrative is that it helps us understand Paul, his opponents, and the other New Testament writers. See Jeffrey Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 129-130.

46. In the next verse (4:3), Paul calls on someone else in the ekklesia to help the women resolve their discord. Bruce Winter discusses this more broadly in *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 98-100.

47. Understanding historical context is essential for comprehending Paul's letters. The task of the scholar is to reconstruct. Richard Horsley and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* (New York, NY: Grosset/Putnam, 1997), 147.

Understanding Ekklesia

Whenever you come across the phrase “kingdom community” or “assembly” in this volume, I’m using it as a substitute for the Greek word “ekklesia,”⁴⁸ which is typically translated “church” in most versions of the New Testament. (Some Bible versions accurately translate “ekklesia” as “assembly” or “congregation.”⁴⁹)

Unfortunately, the term “church” has evolved (or devolved) to mean a denomination, a building, or a religious service.⁵⁰ But in the New Testament, the word referred to something entirely different. An *ekklesia* was an assembly of Jesus-followers.⁵¹ Specifically, an *ekklesia* referred to the assembled people who were part of the kingdom of God in a locality; hence, I use the phrase “kingdom community” or “assembly” to describe “church.”⁵²

48. While *ekklesia* is a Greek word and technically should be italicized as I have done here, it’s become common vocabulary in Christian circles. So going forward, it will not be italicized.

49. The translation used throughout this book (WEB) translates *ekklesia* as “assembly.” So does the Literal Standard Version, Young’s Literal Translation, the Darby Translation, et al.

50. The word “ekklesia” is used 114 times in the New Testament. James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels*, 165. It’s used sixty-two times in Paul’s letters, three in Matthew, twenty-three in Acts, six in the non-Pauline epistles, and twenty times in Revelation. Gerald Hawthorne and Ralph Martin, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 124.

51. Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, 25-28; James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 599-601; *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels*, 166-167; Gerald Hawthorne, et al., eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 123-124; Douglas Mangum, ed., “Assembly,” *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Logos edition (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014). “An *ekklesia* was a meeting or assembly.” It was used to describe “a local congregation of Christians and never a building.” J.D. Douglas and N. Hillyer, eds., *New Bible Dictionary*, second edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 205. According to Wayne Meeks, the term “ekklesia” was borrowed from the political assembly in Greek cities. In the *ekklesia* of God, “there is no temple, no priest, no sacrifice, except Jesus himself.” Wayne Meeks, ed., *Library of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1985-1988), 2:138.

52. Throughout the New Testament, “ekklesia” is relegated to a church in a city while “ekklesias” is relegated to a group of churches in a province. Examples: “the assembly which was in Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1; 11:22); “the assemblies throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria” (Acts 9:31); “He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the assemblies” (Acts 15:41). Watchman Nee makes a compelling case for this observation (one *ekklesia* per city) in his marvelous book, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1980), chaps. 4-5. (Note that the best translations of Acts 9:31 are in the WEB, BLB, LSV, KJV, and NKJV, all of which have the plural “ekklesias.”) For the differences between a city and a province in the Roman Empire, see Gary Burge, Lynn Cohick, and Gene Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament Within Its Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 95-97; Richard

My Hope

For the first twenty years of my Christian life, I never heard anyone reconstruct the story of the first-century church. I heard countless talks on the epistles and the book of Acts, but I hadn't come across a single person who put it all together into a seamless drama. Only later did I discover a few people who attempted this kind of work.⁵³ Yet even today, it's exotically rare. It is for this reason that I've entitled this book *The Untold Story*.⁵⁴ The story is certainly present in the New Testament, but it's rarely told.

The aim of this book, therefore, is to create a working model of the first-century church by weaving together the best available scholarship in the fields of history, New Testament studies, geography, archaeology, and sociology—putting all of it together under one cover. My goal in doing this is three-fold:

1. To help God's people better understand the New Testament so they can avoid misinterpreting and misapplying it.
2. To grip them by the power of the story so they can be transformed by its explosive message.
3. To help them appreciate the genius of God's work within the narrative and discern the principles that govern the advancement of His kingdom today.

Note that this book is *not* to be interpreted as an apologetic for any particular form of church, whether house church, organic church, simple church, missional church, traditional church, industrial church, institutional church, liturgical church, etc.⁵⁵ Neither is it a

Longenecker, ed., *Community Formation in the Early Church and in the Church Today* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 74-80; Clinton Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 2b:37.

53. See the "Acknowledgments" for an explanation.

54. I credit the late James Rutz for giving me the title. When I first began writing the book in the early 2000s, I had a working title. But during a phone conversation with James, he bluntly told me "The Untold Story of the New Testament Church is far better," and I agreed. Also, I'm using the term "church" in the title as a collective word to refer to the entire body of Christ in the New Testament.

55. The normative gathering for the assemblies in the first century was the house, not any specially designated structure. James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 601-606. For details on the social location of the first-century ekklesia, see Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*; Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), chap. 4; Roger Gehring,

defense of any particular theological camp, whether Charismatic, Pentecostal, Reformed, Wesleyan, Baptist, Progressive, etc. The way the early Christians gathered and the focus of their faith are made plain in the story, but the reader is left to decide how to apply the ramifications.

One last thing: This book serves as an introduction to a much larger project that I've been working on for years. Since 2005, I've been holding conferences that present Paul's epistles in a novel way. Those conference messages have been converted into audio master classes that take a 3D, right-brained approach to the epistles. That is, they present the drama behind each letter using what scholars call "narrative exegesis."⁵⁶ If you find this book helpful, you will gain further insight by listening to the master classes.⁵⁷

My hope in penning this volume is that the Lord would use it to give His people a new and exciting glimpse into the New Testament story, which is really *His* story of how the living God continues to bring His heavenly kingdom to planet Earth. And more amazing: that story is also *your* story.

House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004). However, this doesn't mean that any modern group of believers meeting in a house automatically qualifies as an ekklesia in the New Testament sense. Likewise, it doesn't mean that a congregation gathering in a dedicated building cannot be an ekklesia.

56. Walter Hollenweger is credited with the term. I call it "biblical narrative." My books, *God's Favorite Place on Earth* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2013), and *The Day I Met Jesus: The Revealing Diaries of Five Women from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015), written with Mary DeMuth, use this approach. Robert Banks gives an example of his own in *Paul's Idea of Community*, 173ff.

57. These master classes are part of my premium training resource, The Deeper Christian Life Network, found at thedeeperchristianlife.com/classes.

DECODING THE NEW TESTAMENT

The arrangement of the letters of Paul in the New Testament is in general that of their length. When we rearrange them into their chronological order, fitting them as far as possible into their life-setting within the record of the Acts of the Apostles, they begin to yield up more of their treasure; they become self-explanatory, to a greater extent than when this background is ignored.¹

HAVE YOU EVER READ your Bible without understanding what you were reading? Have you ever read any of Paul's letters and wondered,

What did Paul mean when he penned this verse? Who was this letter written to specifically? What were the people to whom he was writing like? How did they live? Where was Paul when he wrote the letter, and what was he feeling? What events prompted him to pen the epistle in the first place?

Have you ever read the book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament and thought to yourself,

When exactly did these events take place? At what point in this riveting drama did Paul, Peter, James, John, and Jude pen their letters? And how do all the books in the New Testament fit together? What special historical events were also occurring during the days of Peter, Paul, and John? And what influence did those events have on the early church?

These were the questions that provoked this book. What's contained in these pages, therefore, is a chronological, socio-historical synopsis of the entire New Testament, the value of which is priceless.

First, understanding the story of the New Testament church will give you a whole new understanding of each New Testament letter—an understanding that is rich, illuminating,

1. G.C.D. Howley in "The Letters of Paul," *New International Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 1095.

and exciting. No longer will you see the epistles as sterile, complicated reads. Instead, they'll turn into flesh and blood voices that are part of a heart-racing saga. To use F.F. Bruce's analogy about mirror-reading from the previous chapter, you'll begin to understand both sides of the phone conversation.

Second, understanding the story will help you see "the big picture" that undergirds the events that followed the birth of the church and its subsequent growth. This "big picture" has at its center an unbroken pattern of God's work. The theme of God's kingdom moving "from eternity to here" is the unifying thread that runs throughout the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Reading this book, therefore, will not only help you better understand your New Testament, it will also give you a fresh, clear-eyed look at the immensity of God's eternal purpose.

Third, understanding the story will supply you with the proper historical context that will equip you to *accurately* apply Scripture to your life. Many Christians routinely take verses out of context and misapply them to their daily living.² But seeing the Scripture in its proper historical context will safeguard you from making this frequent mistake. As one scholar aptly put it, "In order to speak with confidence of 'the beginning of the New Testament story,' we must first examine the biblical passages in their historical context."³

Fourth, understanding the story will radically alter how you study the Bible as well as how you interact during group Bible studies. Have you ever had this experience? You're sitting in a circle in someone's home, listening to everyone's subjective reading of a biblical text. Someone says, "I think Paul meant [xyz] in that verse. That's what I get out of it." Another responds, "What the deuce!? That text has nothing to do with that. What's wrong with you? Did you take hermeneutics with satan or something?"⁴ Your chest tightens, and you conclude that you're sitting in the presence of a full-blown SYI⁵ session. Perhaps you've been there before, maybe one too many times. If so, this book should help with that problem—a lot.

2. I speak from firsthand experience, having done this often as a young believer.

3. Paul Barnett, *Bethlehem to Patmos*, 14.

4. Hermeneutics is the process of biblical interpretation. My scenario is exaggerated, of course, as it's an attempt at humorizing the way Christians sometimes harshly treat one another over differences of biblical interpretation.

5. SYI = share your ignorance.

Combating the Proof-Texting Method

One of the immediate benefits of understanding the story of the New Testament church is that it will deliver you from the “cut-and-paste” approach to Bible study that dominates evangelical thinking today. The “cut-and-paste” approach is the all-too-common practice of coming to the New Testament with scissors and glue,⁶ clipping and pasting together disjointed sentences (verses) from books that were written decades apart to different audiences. This “cut-and-paste” approach has spawned all sorts of spiritual hazards.

One hazard is the misguided practice of “proof-texting,” a technique employed to win theological arguments and build floatable doctrines.⁷ Proof-texting is the lamentable innovation of privileging certain biblical texts that support a certain theology while ignoring context and other texts that present a contrary view. Today, many Christians behave as if the mere citation of some random, de-contextualized verse ends all discussion on virtually every subject.⁸

You take one text, find some remote metaphorical connection with another text, and voilà, an ironclad doctrine is born! But this is an insipid approach to understanding the Bible. While it is great for reading one’s own biases into the text,⁹ it’s horrible for understanding the original intent of the biblical authors. It has been rightly said that a person can prove *anything* by taking Bible verses out of context and lashing them together. Permit

6. I’m speaking metaphorically.

7. Nuance is important here. Citing or referencing a group of scriptural texts to support a point or spiritual truth is not proof-texting, *as long as* those texts are applied within the context of the biblical narrative. Paul and Jesus cited texts often, but they didn’t lift them out of their local contexts and misapply them. Proof-texting only occurs when isolated verses, removed from their historical context, are cited to prove a point. The tendency to proof-text where the “plain sense” of a verse is assumed as the final incontrovertible proof of a given doctrinal position is tragic. Consequently, “the Bible says it, I believe it, so that settles it” becomes a pathetic conversation stopper.

8. In this regard, many Christians suffer from what I call AVS (Acute Versification Syndrome). This is a cognitive condition characterized by an inability to comprehend biblical texts holistically. Those who suffer from this “malady” exhibit a tendency to isolate individual verses, divorcing them from their broader narrative and thematic context. Such people understand the New Testament in terms of sentences rather than story. (My friend Len Sweet calls it “versitis.”) This book offers a cure.

9. The technical term for interpreting a text through one’s presuppositions, agendas, or biases is called “eisegesis.” By contrast, “exegesis” is the legitimate interpretation of a text that reads it in light of what the original authors intended to convey.

me to use an outrageous example. What follows is how a person can biblically “prove” that it is God’s will that people commit suicide. All one has to do is lift two verses out of their historical setting and paste them together:

He [Judas] threw down the pieces of silver in the sanctuary and departed. Then he went away and hanged himself. (Matthew 27:5)

Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:37b)

While this is a preposterous example, it demonstrates how the “cut-and-paste” approach works. Because the New Testament didn’t fall out of heaven with red letters and maps in the back, but rather arose out of real historical situations, proof-texting is not only a dead-end street; it’s dangerous. When you read Paul, Peter, John, etc., you’re reading someone else’s mail. Consequently, when Paul writes to the assembly in Corinth about lawsuits, what he says shouldn’t automatically be applied to every potential situation involving civil cases. Context must be taken into consideration.

Without context, we’ll routinely misunderstand and misapply Scripture, making certain issues binding that are no longer in force and vice versa. As a result, Christians have managed to build doctrines and invent practices that have fragmented the body of Christ into thousands of denominations, movements, and organizations, many of which have been at war with one another for generations. David deSilva sums up the necessity of a contextual understanding in order to accurately interpret Scripture saying,

If we are to hear the texts correctly, we must apply ourselves to understand the culture out of which and to which they spoke. We need to recognize the cultural cues the authors have woven into their strategies and instructions. This enterprise prevents potential misreading of the texts.... Without taking some care to recover the culture of the first-century Greco-Roman writers and addresses, we will simply read the texts from the perspective of our cultural norms and codes. Negatively, then, this task is essential as a check against our impositions of our own cultural, theological and social contexts onto the text.¹⁰

10. David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 18. (A newer edition was published in 2022.) See also Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 24.

Getting the Sequence Right

Another obstacle to accurately understanding Scripture has to do with the way our current Bibles are arranged. The books that make up our New Testament are grossly out of sequence, making it easy for us to “lose the story” as we read. Chronologically, Romans doesn’t follow Acts, and 1 Corinthians wasn’t written after Romans. The same is true for the rest of the New Testament epistles.

Reading the books of the New Testament out of their chronological sequence is like listening to an audiobook on shuffle where the chapters are heard out of order.¹¹ Understanding the chronological sequence of each New Testament book and the socio-historical setting that undergirds it is a powerful remedy for misunderstanding and misapplication.

One may wonder why the New Testament was arranged in its current manner. The answer is that when the New Testament canon was compiled during the second century, Paul’s epistles were arranged according to length rather than according to the time periods in which they were penned.¹² To add to the problem, chapter divisions were inserted in the year 1227, and verse divisions were added in 1551.¹³ These artificial divisions have made the “proof-texting” method of Bible reading almost a default setting. Christopher Smith explains one of the reasons why chapter-verse divisions prevent us from understanding the meaning of a text:

11. For details on this problem, see my article, “Reapproaching the New Testament: The Bible Is Not a Jigsaw Puzzle,” at frankviola.org/jigsaw.pdf.

12. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 120-130; F.F. Bruce, *The Message of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 23. The exception to the order of descending length is Galatians, which is a hair shorter than Ephesians. (Some believe this is due to a scribal gloss.) Also, Hebrews does not appear to be Pauline, so it was not part of the Pauline corpus. In addition, the compiler couldn’t have organized the letters chronologically because none of Paul’s letters had dates on them, and there was no precedent for alphabetical ordering. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer*, 121.

13. Christopher Smith, *The Beauty Behind the Mask*, 15; *After Chapters & Verses* (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica Publishing, 2010), chaps. 1-2. While I personally have no issue with chapters and verses for the purpose of locating specific sentences in the Bible, the invention has created the problems I discuss in this book.

Anyone who has been reading the Bible for even a short time has no doubt noticed many individual examples of how verse divisions can break up sentences and phrases that belong together, or else combine those that should be kept separate.¹⁴

At the end of the day, we simply cannot ignore historical context when reading the Bible—that is, if we want to understand what we’re reading accurately. In the words of David Barr,

We [must] make the basic assumption that an author was trying to communicate something meaningful to the audience for which he or she wrote. This approach attempts to discover who wrote the text, when it was written, and what issues it was intended to address in its own time. Only when we grasp the historical situation of both author and audience can we hope to understand the message communicated.¹⁵

I don’t pretend to have created the ultimate guide to the New Testament or promise something that only God Himself can deliver. As one scholar writes of his own work,

This book makes no claim to be the last word on the subject of the New Testament story; others will tell it differently. My aim is to show that there is a story to be told, based on solid data, and to tell it as simply as I can.¹⁶

That last sentence is precisely what I have sought to accomplish in this book. And I pray it serves you well. Beyond everything else I’ve said in this chapter, I hope that as you watch the spellbinding saga of the New Testament church dance before your eyes, it will revolutionize your Christian life as well as your relationship with the Lord.

14. Christopher Smith, *The Beauty Behind the Mask*, 27. In that book, Smith provides a deep dive into how the man-made chapter-verse divisions in the Bible have kept us from understanding the message that Scripture seeks to convey.

15. David Barr, *An Introduction: New Testament Story* (New York, NY: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995), 6.

16. Paul Barnett, *Bethlehem to Patmos*, 12.

A NOTE ABOUT WORDS AND DEFINITIONS

CHURCH

“Assembly,” “the body of Christ,” “kingdom community,” “believing community,” “Jesus community,” “community of believers,” “ekklesia,” and even “church” are all used as synonyms to refer to a local group of Jesus-followers who are meeting under the headship and kingship of Jesus Christ in a given locality.

CHRISTIANS

“Converts,” “disciples,” “believers,” “followers of Jesus,” “Christ-followers,” “Jesus-followers,” and “Christians” are all used as synonyms to refer to those who have entrusted their lives to Jesus of Nazareth, giving their believing allegiance to Him.¹

THE GOSPEL

“The gospel,” “the gospel of the kingdom,” “the gospel of Christ,” “the gospel of liberty,” “the gospel of grace,” and “preaching Christ” are all used as synonyms for the explosive message that Jesus and the apostles unleashed on the world.²

1. After we come to Acts 11 in our story (when the believers were first called “Christians”), I will sometimes use “Christians” as a synonym for believers/disciples. For the history of the term “Christian,” see James D.G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 1. The word “disciple/disciples” is used thirty times in Acts (WEB). Some key verses that support the idea that all true converts (those who believed in Jesus) were called “disciples” are Acts 6:1-2, 7; 11:26; 14:21-22; 18:23, ESV. Compare with Acts 2:44; 4:4; 5:14; 15:5; 17:12; 19:18, ESV. Interestingly, the term “disciple/disciples” is only used in the Gospels and Acts. The word never appears in Paul’s epistles.

2. The term “gospel” comes from the Old English word “godspell,” and it means “good news” or “good story.” F.F. Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 1. In my book *Insurgence*, I explain how and why these terms all refer to the same message. The New Testament knows only one gospel, but different terms emphasize aspects of it.

CONVERSION

Today, when a person is converted to Christ, phrases like “they were won to the Lord,” “they came to Christ,” “they received Jesus,” “they trusted Christ,” etc., are often used to describe the experience. While I have no problem with any of these phrases, in this volume we will mostly stay with how conversions were described in the book of Acts. Those phrases are:

- They were saved (2:21, 47; 11:14; 16:31, ESV)
- They were added to the Lord (5:14; 11:24, ESV)
- They were added to the ekklesia (2:41, NLT; 2:47, ESV)
- They believed (4:4, 32; 13:12, 48; 14:1, 23; 16:31; 17:12, 34; 18:27; 19:2, 18; 21:20, ESV)
- They believed in the Lord (9:42; 10:43; 11:17; 18:8, ESV)
- They received the word of God (2:41; 11:1; 17:11, ESV)
- They became obedient to the faith (6:7, ESV)³
- They were baptized (2:41; 8:12, 38; 9:18; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5, ESV)
- They turned to the Lord (9:35; 11:21, ESV)
- They were persuaded or convinced (17:4; 18:4; 26:28; 28:23, ESV)⁴

3. The Greek word translated “faith” also includes the idea of loyalty. “Believing obedience” is another way to communicate the idea. N.T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 412.

4. In the opening of Acts 17, Luke uses six words to describe the work of evangelism and the result. Those words are “reasoned,” “explaining,” “demonstrating,” “proclaim,” “persuaded,” and “joined.” They are all present in this text: “Paul, as was his custom, went in to them, and for three Sabbath days *reasoned* with them from the Scriptures, *explaining* and *demonstrating* that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I *proclaim* to you, is the Christ.’ Some of them were *persuaded* and *joined* Paul and Silas, of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and not a few of the chief women” (Acts 17:2-4, italics mine).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

FRANK VIOLA is a bestselling author, conference speaker, blogger, and podcaster. His ministry is designed to help serious followers of Jesus know their Lord more deeply so they can experience real transformation and make a lasting impact.

His blog (frankviola.org) contains over 1,000 articles and is regularly ranked in the top five of all Christian blogs on the Web. His podcast “Christ is All” reached #1 in Canada and #2 in the USA on Apple podcasts with more than 2 million downloads. His more recent “Insurgence podcast” features numerous conversation partners and has been ranked #9 on Apple podcasts with 600,000+ downloads.

Viola is best known for his groundbreaking books: *Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom*, *48 Laws of Spiritual Power*, *From Eternity to Here*, and *God’s Favorite Place on Earth*. Currently, nine of his more than fifteen books have been bestsellers.

LEARN THE STORY

FRANK SPEAKS IN conferences and seminars on the topics treated in his books, including this one. He also holds premium masterminds for people in ministry. His spoken ministry is different from his written work, and many consider it to be more powerful.

If you would like to book him to speak at your conference, church, seminary, Bible school, or discipleship training center, go to frankviola.org/events for details. Samples also appear on the page.

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